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LETTER *FROM* PONTIUS PILATE'S WIFE

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CATHERINE VAN DYKE

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Rewritten by

CATHERINE VAN DYKE

PUBLISHERS
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
INDIANAPOLIS

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FIRST EDITION

Printed in the United States of America

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To

EDWARD W. BOK

When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.

MATTHEW 27:19

PREFACE

This is rewritten from an old traditional manuscript first found in a monastery at Bruges, where it had lain for centuries. When Madame de Maintenon became consort of Louis XIV of France she had this letter read every Good Friday before the court assembled at Versailles. In some of the older communities of Europe its reading follows the washing of the feet of the poor on Good Friday, in remembrance of Christ's washing the feet of His disciples. A copy of the original letter was also found among the private papers of the late Czarina of Russia, and was given by her in trust to a friend to keep until the Czarina expected to return from the fateful last journey to Tsarskoe Selo.

C. v D.

A LETTER
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You ask me, dear and faithful friend, for an account of some of the rumors which have already reached you concerning Pontius and myself, and you appear frightened at the mystery by which we are enveloped. Read this my scroll and give to me at least an understanding, for oh, Fulvia, I am the wife of the man who condemned Jesus Christ to death.

If even here in this little Gallic

mountain town where Pontius and I have been driven, he by remorse, I by the scorn of Rome as well as that of Jerusalem—if even here children slink away from us and women draw their veils closer, let me believe that somewhere some woman will understand even as she the mother of Jesus would have understood.

But first remember my childhood in Narbonne. You will recall that I had scarcely completed my fifteenth year when I was betrothed to Pontius then holding an honorable position in Illyria. I had never seen Pontius before my marriage feast,

nor did I know any love nor how that flame may burn within the human breast. Pontius somewhat praised my beauty, and I know he esteemed my wealth for he was ambitious. Love he held a weakness fit only for women for Pontius was a philosopher.

Although the flute-players pleaded all night before my bridal chamber they did not know I lay alone, for Pontius had put me from him saying, "I seek truth, the truth of life." Often he would rise from his library closeted with his scribes and poise against the dawn and my empty arms,

the question, "What is truth?" Thus five years passed before I became wife enough to be a mother. Then I lived a new life in the rapture of my child.

But, Fulvia, only love can beget love and its perfect image. My son Pilo, so beautiful, so bright in his smile that the very slaves looked up when he passed, my son had a withered foot. But soon he learned to walk with a very little crutch. Pontius was divided between his chagrin in a son who could not be a soldier and pride that he yet had an heir to his name, old as Rome itself.

Now ambition stirred in him the politician. Cæsar's favor named him Consul of Judea, a step toward Egypt. Thus we came to Jerusalem. None of all the vast lands that paid tribute to Rome was more beautiful than these purple hills folding back into the yellow sands. Roses and scented myrtle trailed to every roof-top, while the palms lovelier even than those at Delos, waved above gnarled gray olive-trees or groves of oranges or those scarlet pomegranates of which their Solomon had sung.

Above all, even above our Roman

courts, towered the mighty temple of Jerusalem, its sacrificial smoke smudging the sky. But all the flattering pomps and pageantries of our coming mocked us. The Hebrews detested us and our court of "idolatrous pagans," as they styled my countrymen. These Jews were a turbulent people and very heady. Their thousand sects were united only in the hate of Rome.

Some few believed the time had come to pass for a Messiah to appear who would make himself king and overthrow our own power. In this we felt them very secretly abetted by

Herod, not for any treason but that he had a cousin who would supplant Pontius. Now he would show that Pontius could not rule these peoples. Herod held his right most because he was a fisherman, and Cæsar, too, was a fisherman. And they wrote one to the other about their fishing in the ripening of that spring. Now we were apportioned part of the palace of Herod and were much beholden to him. If Herod drew upon himself the scorn of those Sadducees he sought most to please with his dancing-girls and wine-feasts, Pontius too was hated by the Pharisees with whom

he would wrangle his question "What is truth?"

Austere and very just in his judgments here, yet my husband judged not the ache in my heart nor turned to me then as to a faithful servant. Had it not been for my boy, Pilo, I would have died of loneliness in Jerusalem, even in all the dazzling circumstance with which Rome upheld our court. My boy became my love, my life. Withered though his foot was, he was brave and threw away his crutch early and endured without any protest all the torments of the pullers and straighteners

Pontius brought increasingly, for more and more he looked to our son.

Now at this time, we had acquaintance with one Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue. When Pontius would argue with him his philosophy I would sit in the woman's court where the fountain is and embroider upon my veils with his wife, Salome. They had an only child, Smedia. She had then just reached her twelfth year and was lovely as those dawn roses which in all the world grow only at Jerusalem.

When Pontius spread out his hands against the argument of Jairus,

I in my loneliness listened to Salome. First in my court, then many times on her own roof, she whispered to me of one Jesus, a carpenter of Nazareth who walked among these people, healing the sick, curing lepers, making the dumb cry out, the blind to see. And now he had made a lame child leap up whole. A lame child! Oh, Fulvia!

Now others, unbelievers, politicians, the Pharisees themselves, began to talk of this Jesus. Herod told us he had taken a tribute-piece from a fish's mouth, and laughed heartily, and so did all. Then they said he

raised a man of Bethany from the dead. Now all Jerusalem rang with this Jesus. But in his discourse was no miracle, only the healing of empty cleverness with simple truth.

Salome said he said, "You must become as a little child to know God." But Pontius forbade us, or any of the household, to approach Jesus, for Pontius was very learned, nor would he wish to become as a child. When once I pleaded he put me by with, "Yes, yes, I know, this Jesus has turned water into wine; he multiplied a few loaves and fishes to feed many; he disappeared out of a

crowded room, but so the conjurers of the East have done. Let him show me how it is done so I myself may do these things, and when I do them I may believe. I want truth not any trickery. Hold thyself Claudia Procula, very high; thou art a Roman's wife."

But now I pitied Pontius. He had many cares and a very lean look. His rulings took him often from us, and then he had lost his taste for life itself as one who, grown arid among his parchments, could not see what was real before himself. Many wise men are so, Fulvia.

Then a strange sickness fell upon us that summer. Its malice gathered with the heat. Particularly it wasted children with a torpor like of death itself. So it numbed my boy. He thinned, whitened, fell. Even Pilate was roused. He sent runners to Athens, to Alexandria, to Rome itself, for draughts. And the weakness increased. Now the gentle sweetness of my boy was scarcely of earth. I trembled. Then the child of Jairus and Salome was stricken, and quickly. The night Smedia died the physicians also turned away from my boy's couch.

Pilate, to meet the end, closeted himself with his Stoics. I was alone with my dying Pilo, and his tutor Mata, a Greek slave to Pontius. Now Mata pressed a tablet into my hand. It was from Jairus. It said, "Jesus will come to Smedia, even dead. Do thou bring Pilo." A faint trembling light shot into my soul. All else had failed. My child's last breath was almost burned out. Could he, this Jesus, save my son?

Scarcely knowing it was my own voice, my arms, my substantial self, I followed Mata. He held Pilo very gently and glided softly, swiftly, into

the dawn, like a shadow with a shadow. I had not known it but Mata was a follower of Jesus. But when we came to the street of Jairus our chariot could not proceed further, the crowd was so great.

Mata would not have us known imperially so I stood heavily veiled as mourner. Thus I was slowly given passage through the outer wailers and the flute-players and the many poor, and those fisherfolk who follow Jesus, and those Pharisees and Scribes who seek the more to trap him into treason against Cæsar.

These would give me no entrance

beyond the vestibule for they wished not witnesses. But oh, Fulvia, to have gained thus far and now to fail my chance to ask for Pilo his life, of Jesus! Then at the head of the stairway I saw Jairus. Before the authority of his hand a way opened upward. But when I was at the bedchamber door Jairus quickly withdrew and I could not move farther nor yet descend again. I could only wait there, pressed, agonizing.

So I saw into the chamber of death and, through the clouds of thick incense, Smedia lying upon her funeral bier, very white with com-

plete death. Beside her, utterly bowed, was Salome and many burning candles and many faces. And then I saw him, Fulvia. Then I saw Jesus. Scarcely did he seem a man to my first sight, nor yet a person. Though his face and hands, his very garments, were as those of them about him, rather he was some presence, some undefined feeling as of the very loveliness of love itself.

All the chamber seemed full of the fullness of his love. Like an empty vase now filled with precious spikenard, so I felt all the heights and depths of my being flooded with the

loveliness of Jesus. Nor was there any bitterness left in me, only love.

Suddenly I saw Jairus throw himself upon his knees before Jesus. He cried, "Lord, my daughter is dead. Say but the word and she shall be healed." A shudder ran through my frame; my very soul hung upon his words. Then Jesus took Smedia by the hand and said, "Arise."

Fulvia, she obeyed him.

She rose. Her eyes opened upon us all. Slowly her face flushed with life. She looked into the eyes of Jesus. Then she threw out her arms and cried:

"Why, Mother!"

I did not know I had fallen upon my knees, but presently I was aware of the trampling crowd. There were shouts about me, but so strangely few of joy, and these alone from the household. More were of hate, and many hissed. I turned desperately every which way to try to get to Jesus. But the crowd crushed me down the steep stair, and tided me further and further until I sobbed with my despair. For now I knew I could not ask Jesus to heal Pilo.

So they pushed me through the shouters of hate, and the Pharisees,

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who called him loudly, "Blasphemer, hater of Cæsar," until I was forced into a little passageway roofed with gourds and some long cucumbers. And there I heard a cry. It will ring for ever in my ears. "Mother, Mother!"

Through all the multitudes sprang Pilo into my arms. Pilo, erect and firm, without any sickness in him. And more, nay more. He dragged no withered foot. My Pilo leaped, walked, danced, all sound. His feet were as lovely as his face. Pilo, my son, made whole.

Before I had asked of Jesus he had

heard. More than I had asked, he had granted.

Oh, Fulvia!

Now I must struggle to write you of what follows. My words are difficult. Beyond Pontius's pride in Pilo made whole, beyond his love for the boy which sprang new-born from out the very cheers of the soldiers, for Pilo was now a very marvel of sport and joy, Pontius must satisfy his own mind for the heart he reckoned not.

"There is some trickery here," he said. "This man is but a carpenter and without education and I am a man of learning. I must search the

matter closely before you or yet Pilo may see again this Jesus."

And into his doubt crept also fear, and very closely following, his ambition. Herod said to him:

"Beware of this Nazarene. He is dangerous to us. He would make himself King here. I have information from the inside."

And Pilate wished to be further appointed at Egypt, and would be thought well of by Herod and so by Cæsar. We went with Herod that spring into the deep sea, nor did we return until the Paschal time of the Jews was at hand. This famed feast

yearly gathered together at Jerusalem numbers from all the tribes of Israel to offer sacrifice.

The day before their feast Pontius said to me:

"The fates are against your Jesus of Nazareth. A price has been put upon his head, and before eventide he will be delivered up to the chief priests."

"But, Father, you will save Jesus, of course." When Pilo said this, easily, Pontius put the boy at once away with Mata to the hills for he would not look into his eyes. Nor would he allow me even converse that

day with any outside, but bade me severely to keep to my woman's court. He looked haggard, desperate with uncertainty.

But I could not sleep that night for the calling of Jesus's face. When the last bugle of the temple sounded I was like one who dreams awake. And this was the dream I dreamed:

I saw a great hillside and it was covered with all the children Jesus had healed. Pilo and Smedia were there and many many others. And beside them were their fathers and mothers and all of every kind and degree who were joined into a great

kindred by the love of Jesus. And there were those also who had been healed in heart and mind as well as body, and more who had needed no healing, but only the right to love life itself.

And none were idle but all worked with the hands or the mind and both the hands and faces sang and shone. And all were refreshed in their work, for each had found the outlet of his peculiar genius. So this was a new race. And young and old, this one thing lay upon their faces, for in the love of Jesus all were as children and without fear or greed, but greatly

glorified, so their unfolding of themselves was like a canticle of unceasing beauty.

And apart, wrapped in a swollen angry cloud, drifted without aim many others. These were not as children but very aged, with a toil which brought them always to work in a circle back to themselves. And they cursed this and that, and pursued lust and power and cried in an agony of fear, so their cries were horrible, and their sufferings very great.

And Pontius the philosopher was among them. And his arms were worn away from entreating Pilo from

afar off to turn to him. And so Pontius cried out to me. And in my sweat of pity, for Pontius was a just man and very learned, I woke. I ran to his bedchamber crying, "Pontius, Pontius, believe. Cease thy philosophies. Believe as a little child on Jesus."

But my maids laughed me to scorn for my night cry and said:

"The Governor is in the judgment-seat. There is somewhat there."

And now a murmur swelled loudly from the city, with sudden yells. My heart throbbed as though it would burst from me. I heard the tread of

many feet other than the iron-shod soldiers upon the marble court below leading to the Pretorium.

I flew to Pontius. He was seated in the tribunal. I drew aside the purple curtain. I saw, oh, Fulvia—— I saw Jesus, Pilo's Jesus. His hands were tied. The cords cut into his bones, and his face was streaming blood.

But in all the agony of his body, which was very beaten about, his eyes were full of love. So he looked gently upon Pontius, who was frenzied with doubt now.

The crowd pressed about Jesus

uncommonly, the soldiers, and Scribes and Pharisees, the drunken, the lowest of night rabble. Nor did I see any friend near Jesus. They had brought him from the priests in the garden, and, kicking, striking him, had maimed one another, as himself. The very demons peered out of their terrible faces.

And he healed many.

And Pilate was unable to decide his sentence, for he was afraid for his ambition. Now he would ask questions of them, and now of Jesus. And Pontius was iced with fear.

I heard him say again, "What is

it you ask of me to do to this just man? What evil has he done?" And then he swayed a little and said, "Has he not healed some of you?" Nor then would he look at the eyes of Jesus.

Their high priest, Caiaphas, made answer, "We ask the death of this man, for he would make himself King here instead of Cæsar."

Pontius, like one who would increase time, asked directly of Jesus, "Art thou the King of the Jews?"

And Jesus looked into Pontius deeply as to open a gap into his subtleties. Oh, Fulvia, that look of the

blood-stained Christ! He asked not for help from Pontius even at this hour when he had no friend, but rather sought to find the healing way to his own judge.

He said, "Dost thou ask this of thine own self, or dost another self speak for thee?"

And Pontius turned in an agony, for he could not decide, and the roar of the crowd was great.

Then Jesus said to Pontius, as if alone in all that shrieking madness, "My kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is the truth that lies within you as within all born into this

world. To reveal thyself in truth am I come."

Then Pilate leaned forward, and I thought, "Now, now he will deliver Jesus." But the crowd cried suddenly, "He is opposed to Cæsar. Who is friend to this man is no friend of Cæsar." Then I saw fear like a substance, and hard and white, slip over the face, the hands, the very robes of Pontius. He looked this way and that, at the guards, the crowd, the priests. Then he said dryly, like a philosopher:

"What is truth?" And stayed not for any answer.

At the corridor leading to the Sanhedrin, I fell before Pontius on my knees.

"Pontius," I cried, "this is Jesus, Jesus the very Christ, the Son of God. And, Pontius, it is Pilo's dear Jesus, he who healed our boy. Have no part in his death. I have suffered many things in a dream this night of him. For thine own, for even the sake of all those judges in this world who will come after thee and judge in Christ's name without fear, for our child, for me, Claudia, thy wife, Pontius, save Jesus the Christ."

But Pontius's sweat was gray upon

his face. He could not decide. He said, and staggered, "This is fearful. Now am I in hell. I can not stem this outbreak of the priests, for they are powerful here. Herod has asked me to make an example of this man. If not he will speak ill of me to Cæsar. And if this Jesus be the truth or not, I can not decide, for I am a philosopher and must argue the matter further. My mind rejects this man who is but a carpenter, and yet" —he pushed his hands forward and groaned from his deeps—"I feel, I feel——"

And then the guards came for-

ward. They stepped briskly, for they held scourging a fine sport. And a shriek rose everywhere, "Crucify him!"

Then I heard the sound of splitting flesh. When I came to the outer prison yard, even in my faint, something of myself saw very clearly, Jesus, bound to a pillar and standing in a red pool of his own blood. And Pretorious, one of our body-guard, whose broken hand Jesus had once healed, now scourged him the hardest.

And now they put a crown of thorns on his head and pressed it down, and the eyes bulged. And

they wrapped him in an old fine robe of Pontius's own. And Pontius staggered even in the judgment-seat, and said like a dead man:

"Why, I find no fault in him." And he washed his hands in the silver-gilt basin and sought every which way increasingly to save Jesus. But they would not release him even for the custom of their Passover, but preferred some robber, whose name has now left me.

And now a runner brought a scroll with the secret seal of Herod saying, "Have done quickly with all prisoners this night, for to-morrow I set early

for Rome and would speak well of thee to Cæsar. Do thou set out early with me for a bit of the way, for I have found a new little brook and many fine trout."

And Pontius and Herod had made themselves into friends that day, one to further the other with Cæsar.

And when Pontius said to the mob, which shrieked, "What shall I do with this man?" and they shouted as one, "Crucify him; as you are Cæsar's friend, crucify him!"—he delivered Jesus unto them.

And before Pontius went afishing with Herod he wrote this title for

the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Thou, oh, Fulvia, who art a Christian, need not be told of what followed.

Thou knowest how Jesus himself dragged his cross to the Hill of Death, and at the last of his agony died upon it, and that Mary, his mother, stood with him to the end, and so looked upon her son, who had healed my son, and was condemned by mine own husband unto death.

In the fever and long delirium that seized upon Pontius we lived terribly through many terrible events. For,

at the death of our Jesus, the earth trembled and darkness fell upon us, and many, even our centurion, said, "This was in truth the Son of God."

And many more believed on him when he rolled the stone away from his own sepulchre and walked among his people in company with his disciples, who now themselves did heal and teach his words.

But now, though my soul was on its knees before him in supplication for Pontius, Pontius could not believe, but studied increasingly, and was wretched to look upon. Such calamity fell upon him, my heart

ached for this man, my husband. Blow on blow fell on Pontius, even as once the scourge had fallen on Jesus.

When Pilo returned and heard his father had condemned Jesus to death, he fell and was dead. Nor did I wish him to live, for never could my child have forgiven his father, for he loved Jesus very dearly.

Then Herod, for whose fear Pontius had delivered Jesus, spoke against Pontius privately to Cæsar and had his own cousin appointed at Jerusalem. And Pilate was judged and sentenced by the Senate at Rome un-

justly, for there were false witnesses. And he suffered greatly in this, for, until he falsely judged the Christ he had been very upright. With his honor, he lost his friends. His lands at Rome were taken and he had at the last no penny, but must walk like a slave. His library was scattered.

Gnawed with his remorse, Pilate sees in me the witness to his crime and everywhere he feels the eyes of the Christians burning into him, as did those eyes of Christ. At their meetings they tell the life of Jesus and have a sentence which for ever sentences Pontius.

"He suffered under Pontius Pilate."

And Pontius is a scholar and knows that words live for ever. So his own learning too betrayed him. Now are we driven to this mountain crag in Gallia, whence Euphonius will bring you this scroll.

Pontius has become old and ill and very weak, so he is at last a child. In his weakness is my hope. Oh, Fulvia, if only now, when every moment presses to his last, if now the learned mind would cease its doubts, and forget itself in the love of Christ and with the pitiful heart be healed as once was healed my Pilo. If now he,

my husband, who condemned Jesus for fear of others to death, could without fear go to his own judgment by the Son of God.

Ye who pray, pray now for Pontius.

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